

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 205

SP 034 337

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TITLE Teacher-As-Researcher. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SP-92-7
PUB DATE Mar 93
CONTRACT RI88062015
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; *Curriculum Development; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; Participative Decision Making; *Policy Formation; School Restructuring

IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Research; ERIC Digests; Reform Efforts; *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

In the spirit of educational reform efforts, this digest examines the concept of teacher-as-researcher, a concept rooted in action research. Action research is designed, conducted, and implemented by teachers themselves to improve teaching in the classroom. The research is often a collaborative activity promoting reflective teaching, critical inquiry, self-evaluation, and professional dialogue, thereby creating a more professional culture in schools. Action research has been employed for various purposes including school-based curriculum development, system planning, and policy development. The current school restructuring movement has site-based, shared decision-making at its core; therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts, attending more carefully to methods, perceptions, understandings, and the whole approach to the teaching process. Action research provides teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skill in research methods and applications and to become more aware of options and possibilities for change forcing the re-evaluation of current theories and influencing what is known about teaching, learning, and schooling. (Contains 16 references.) (LL)

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ED355205

ERIC DIGEST
TEACHER-AS-RESEARCHER

by

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Teacher-As-Researcher

Beverly Johnson

The concept of teacher-as-researcher is included in recent literature on educational reform, which encourages teachers to be collaborators in revising curriculum, improving their work environment, professionalizing teaching, and developing policy. Teacher research has its roots in action research.

What Is Action Research?

Action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982).

While the concept of action research can be traced back to the early works of John Dewey in the 1920s and Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, it is Stephen Corey and others at Teachers College of Columbia University who introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949. Corey (1953) defined action research as the process through which practitioners study their own practice to solve their personal practical problems.

Very often action research is a collaborative activity where practitioners work together to help one another design and carry out investigations in their classrooms. Teacher action research is, according to John Elliott, "concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced by teachers, rather than the 'theoretical problems' defined by pure researchers within a discipline of knowledge" (Elliott, cited in Nixon, 1987). Research is designed, conducted, and implemented by the teachers themselves to improve teaching in their own classrooms, sometimes becoming a staff development project in which teachers establish expertise in curriculum development and reflective teaching.

The prevailing focus of teacher research is to expand the teacher's role as inquirer about teaching and learning through systematic classroom research (Copper, 1990). The approach is naturalistic, using participant-observation techniques of ethnographic research, is generally collaborative, and includes characteristics of case study methodology (Belanger, 1992).

The research study team provides support and a forum for sharing questions, concerns, and results. Teachers advise each other and comment on the progress of individual efforts. Engaging in collaborative action research helps eliminate the isolation that has long characterized teaching, as it promotes professional dialogue and thus, creates a more professional culture in schools.

What Is the Purpose of Teacher Action Research?

Action research has been employed for various purposes: for school-based curriculum development, as a professional development strategy, in preservice and graduate courses in education, and in systems planning and policy development. Some writers (i.e., Holly, 1990; Jacullo-Noto, 1992; Lieberman, 1988; Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Sagor, 1992) advocate an action research approach for school restructuring. Action research can be used as an evaluative tool, which can assist in self-evaluation whether the "self" be an individual or an institution.

Why Is Teacher Research Important?

The current school restructuring movement has site-based, shared decision-making at its core. With the newly acquired autonomy, comes new responsibilities. Teachers, local schools, and school districts are accountable to all stakeholders for the policies, programs, and practices they implement. It is not enough for teachers merely to make decisions, they will be called upon to make informed decisions; decisions which are data driven. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts. Action research is one means to that end. It is very likely the emergence of site-based decisionmaking has precipitated the resurgence of action research; the two seem to be complementary. Action research assists practitioners and other stakeholders in identifying the needs, assessing the development processes, and evaluating the outcomes of the changes they define, design, and implement. The self-evaluation aspect of action research (by educators and/or students) is congruent with the philosophies contained in the Total Quality Education and Outcomes Based Education movements currently being advanced by numerous states and districts throughout the nation.

What Are the Effects of Action Research?

There is a growing body of evidence of the positive personal and professional effects that engaging in action research has on the practitioner (Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Lieberman, 1988). Action research provides teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skill in research methods and applications and to become more aware of the options and possibilities for change. Teachers participating in action research become more critical and reflective about their own practice (Oja & Pine, 1989; Street, 1986). Teachers engaging in action research attend more carefully to their methods, their perceptions and understandings, and their whole approach to the teaching process.



Lawrence Stenhouse once said, "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it" (cited in Rudduck, 1988). As teachers engage in action research they are increasing their understanding of the schooling process. What they are learning will have great impact on what happens in classrooms, schools, and districts in the future. The future directions of staff development programs, teacher preparation curricula, as well as school improvement initiatives, will be impacted by the things teachers learn through the critical inquiry and rigorous examination of their own practice and their school programs that action research requires.

Teachers' action research questions emerge from areas they consider problematic; from discrepancies between what is intended and what actually occurs. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) suggest, the unique feature of teachers' questions is that they emanate solely neither from theory nor from practice, but from "critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (p. 6). Teacher research will force the re-evaluation of current theories and will significantly influence what is known about teaching, learning, and schooling.

It has been said, "Teachers often leave a mark on their students, but they seldom leave a mark on their profession" (Wolfe, 1989). Through the process and products of action research teachers will do both.

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The Clearinghouse thanks Anne Marie Harnett for her contribution to the development of this Digest.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education, under contract number RI 88062015. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department.

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